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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HISTORY IN A DEMOCRACY

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A People Who Have Not the Pride to Record Their History Will Not Long Have the Virtue to Make History That Is Worth Recording.

CLIO, MUSE OF HISTORY

MONUMENT UNVEILED AT GUILFORD BATTLE GROUND, NEAR GREENSBORO, N. C., JULY 3, 1909.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HISTORY IN A DEMOCRACY

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BY

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An Address delivered at the unveiling of a monument to the Muse of History on the Guilford Battle Ground, near Greensboro, N. C., July 3, 1909

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HISTORY IN A DEMOCRACY

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

There is a day famous in the creed and practice of Christendom known as All Saints' Day. On this day honor and reverence are paid without distinction to all the saints and martyrs who have gone before. At other times individual saints and individual martyrs have their individual days; but on this great democratic day all saints and all martyrs, wherever their loyal dust may lie, receive their merited guerdon of praise and gratitude. It is a homage as honorable to those that render it as to those that receive it, for it is a homage paid not so much to saints themselves as to the universal spirit of saintliness, not so much to martyrs as to the inner meaning of martyrdom. All Saints' Day has its secular counterpart in the day and in the occasion that have brought us together. The Fourth of July is for us and our posterity All Heroes' Day. And the monument which we have met to dedicate is a monument not to this hero or to that hero, but to the spirit of heroism which made them what they were. It symbolizes no detached date or occurrence in history. It is itself the august spirit of history.

There is to my mind something peculiarly beautiful and suggestive in the thought that this Greek figure is henceforth to keep watch and ward over this historic field. Beneath the shadow of this figure Socrates talked and Plato dreamed and Aristotle reasoned. Into those eyes Sappho looked as she sang herself into the heart-history of the world. Around the base of this figure, in Athenian portico or in Attic grove, Greek boys and girls gathered to hear again the story of Helen and Paris and Ulysses. From its pedestal outward Pericles spread the splendor of a democracy which has served as beacon light for all democracies. The far-off Queen of Sweden cherishes as an unpurchasable heritage one of these Greek

figures which the mutations of history have transferred from Athens to Stockholm.

This historic figure, ladies and gentlemen, could not have played the part that it has played in human thought and in national progress unless it symbolized some universal truth. The other eight muses have had their day, but this figure lives on. Receding nations catch glimpses of it and are stirred to renewed effort. Youthful nations interpret it in terms of practical patriotism and of constructive idealism. It beckons to poets and philosophers, to statesmen and historians, giving a wider horizon to their thought and a finer unity to their concepts. Every discovery of an historical truth, every refutation of an historical error, every contribution by word or deed to a nation's story is a leaf added to the laurel chaplet around the brow of the Muse of History. Jefferson saw this figure when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. It was shield and buckler to the great Washington. It was with Cornelius Harnett when he defied the power of Tryon. It stood at Charlotte and at Halifax. It was by the side of William R. Davie when he laid the foundations of the University of North Carolina. And I pray God that when the things of sense grew dim to the fading eyes of the patriots who fell here, this immortal figure may have passed before their vision as a herald of the time when their memory should be pedestaled in triumph and their example become a nation's heritage.

To the Greek mind statuary was not only a thing of beauty and a joy forever: it was the outward and visible sign of an inward and abiding truth. A study of this statue will show that there are two underlying conceptions which have served to vitalize and perpetuate it through all the centuries.

The first great truth that the Greek artist wrought into the pose and grouping of this figure is the vital relationship that should ever exist between the present and the past. Whenever a Greek looked upon this figure he observed that the single scroll in the uplifted hand had been taken from the

sheaf of scrolls in the casket behind. The single scroll, the scroll that the Muse of History is reading, represents present time; the scrolls in the casket represent past time. The present, therefore, is included in the past, for it is the product of the past; and out of the treasures of the past a progressive nation must seek the meaning and conduct of the present.

It was this unbroken continuity of history, this duty of the present to recognize its filial obligation to the past, that drew from Tennyson one of his most characteristic messages:

> "Love thou thy land, with love far-brought
> From out the storied past, and used
> Within the present, but transfused
> Through future time by power of thought."

In his great essay on *The Meaning of History* Frederic Harrison defines the past as "that power which to understand is strength, which to repudiate is weakness." The motto of our efficient State Historical Commission will henceforth find an eloquent advocate on this field:

"The roots of the present lie deep in the past, and nothing in the past is dead to the man who would learn how the present came to be what it is."

A democracy, fellow-citizens, can not afford to be ungrateful. Built as it is on loyal service and patriotic sacrifice, the day of its forgetting will be the day of its undermining. Other nations trace their origin back through a long series of successful and unsuccessful wars. We find our national genesis in a single war; and the measure of our greatness and stability will be the measure of our gratitude to the men who made Yorktown possible.

I wish also to enter my protest here against the lifeless and mechanical way in which our Revolutionary history is so frequently taught. The purely scientific method of cause and effect has its rightful place in colleges and universities, but whenever the Revolutionary War is interpreted to youthful minds in terms merely of great industrial or social or

political movements and not in terms also of personal heroism and individual initiative, the actors in the struggle seem mere puppets. They are but the playthings of irresistible external forces. There is no charm or personal appeal in the story thus told. There is information, it may be, but no inspiration. No great literature of stimulant song and story will ever spring from our Revolutionary history unless that history is taught in terms of individual heroism on the one side and individual gratitude on the other.

There are those, however, who say—or who used to say—that the lesson of relatedness to the past and of consequent indebtedness can not appropriately be taught by the Battle of Guilford Court House. It is not my purpose to go into historical details, but the North Carolinian who accurately informs himself of what took place here on March 15, 1781, and who does not thrill with pride and gratitude is unworthy of his citizenship. One hundred and twenty-eight years ago there was a rail fence yonder and in front of it an open field. On this side of the fence lay the North Carolina militia under Eaton and Butler. Across the open field, advancing from west to east, charged the flower of the English army. There are elements of pathos as well as of glory in the scene. These foemen spoke the same language; they knew by heart the same prayers; their institutions were the same; Shakespeare and the English Bible were the common heritage of both; and both were equally proud of their Anglo-Saxon blood and of what it had accomplished. But these North Carolina militiamen had never seen an English soldier before, nor had they been present at a battle. They had shot rabbits, squirrels, and an occasional fox, but no larger game. If they succeed gloriously there will be no promotion, for they are not professional soldiers. If they fall, the only note taken of it will be the widowed cry of some desolate woman as she fronts the future alone.

If the North Carolina militia, with thoughts like these stirring at their hearts, can hold their ground and reserve

their fire till the English army, disciplined on a hundred battlefields, has come within easy shooting range, if they can stand the ordeal of merely waiting and then pull their triggers with steady aim,—they will have done the bravest deed that either army on that eventful field can boast. Let history answer. Captain Dugald Stewart, of Scotland, who led his men across the open field, says:[1]

"In the advance we received a very deadly fire from the Irish line [he means the Scotch-Irish North Carolinians] of the American Army. One half of the Highlanders dropped on that spot." Brown, in his *History of the Highland Clans*, says: "The Americans [the untrained North Carolina militia], covered by the fence in their front, reserved their fire until the British were within thirty or forty paces, at which distance they opened a most destructive fire, which annihilated nearly one third of Colonel Webster's Brigade."[2]

The following letter was written by an American soldier shortly after the battle and published in the *New Jersey State Gazette* of April 11, 1781:

"The enemy were so beaten that we should have disputed the victory could we have saved our artillery, but the General thought that it was a necessary sacrifice. The spirits of the soldiers would have been affected if the cannon had been sent off the field, and in this woody country cannon can not always be sent off at a critical moment.

"The General, by his abilities and good conduct and by his activity and bravery in the field, has gained the confidence and respect of the army and the country to an amazing degree. You would, from the countenances of our men, believe they had been decidedly victorious. They are in the highest spirits, and appear most ardently to wish to engage the enemy again. The enemy are much embarrassed by their wounded. When we consider the nakedness of our troops and of course

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1 See Caruthers's *Life of Caldwell*, p. 237.

2 Both of these citations may be found in *A Memorial Volume of the Guilford Battle Ground Company*, prepared by Judge David Schenck and published in 1893 by Reece & Elam, Greensboro, N. C.

their want of discipline, their numbers, and the loose, irregular manner in which we came into the field, I think we have done wonders. I rejoice at our success, and were our exertions and sacrifices published to the world as some commanding officers would have published them, we should have received more applause than our modesty claims."[3]

These letters from actual participants in the battle tell their own story. They do more. They make it plain that for a quarter of a century the most unselfish form of practical patriotism exhibited in North Carolina has been exhibited by the Guilford Battle Ground Company. With but one meager appropriation from the National Government, with an inadequate appropriation from the State Government, they have exhumed the bodies of our heroic dead, they have redeemed their memories, they have made the name of Guilford Court House known and honored where it was unknown before, and they have brought to the historic past of North Carolina a new meaning and an added renown. Surely there is no place in this State where a monument, whose design is to invest the past with new significance and the present with a larger sense of responsibility, could be so fitly dedicated as on this spot and by this company.

There is a clause in the letter last cited that suggests the second teaching of this monument. The writer says:

"Were our exertions and sacrifices published to the world as some commanding officers would have published them, we should have received more applause than our modesty claims."

In other words, there had come to the writer of this letter a dim realization of the fact that the writing of history is part of the making of history, that the deed of an individual or of an army or of a nation is comparatively incomplete and ineffective unless perpetuated in writing. This great truth the Greeks were also the first to apply in a national way.

[3] I am indebted for this letter to my friend, Mr. B. C. Gregory, Superintendent of the Public Schools of Chelsea, Mass.

History, as represented by Greek genius in the design of this statue, is a recorded history, a history written down on legible and accessible scrolls, to be read of all men. The written scrolls in the casket and the written scroll in the hand are evidence that to the Greek consciousness Clio was the tutelary deity not of history enacted but of history recorded. Other deities presided over the events that went to the making of a nation's history. To the Muse of History was assigned the honor of garnering in written form the example of the past for the emulation or avoidance of the present. No such conception could have originated among a people who had not themselves attained a rare degree of civilization, who had not themselves realized their grateful indebtedness to the past, or who did not feel at the same time a sense of trusteeship for the future.

The lines written by the President of the Guilford Battle Ground Company[4] express with accuracy and beauty the second teaching of this monument:

"As sinking silently to night,
Noon fades insensibly,
So truth's fair phase assumes the haze
And hush of history.

But lesser lights relieve the dark
Dumb dreariness of night,
And o'er the past historians cast
At least a stellar light."

It is this great truth that we dedicate afresh to-day. The darkness that has rested upon this field shall be dispelled and the starlight of history shall irradiate it with imperishable splendor. If I were to call the roll of the nations foremost in history and ask how their historic past escaped the thralldom of the tyrannous years and why it lives on in undiminished youth and beauty, the Muse of History would answer that these nations have themselves realized the duty of

[4] Major Joseph M. Morehead, to whom alone belongs the credit for this monument and who for seventeen years has labored unselfishly and unceasingly to establish the truth of North Carolina history.

preserving their past for the guidance and enrichment of their future. By history and biography, by song and story, by epitaph and monument, they have made of their past an ever living present.

The glory of Greece lives forever in the Iliad and Odyssey and is inscribed on a thousand marble memorials. Rome immortalized her past in the Æneid. England's greatest historian was Shakespeare, and Westminster Abbey is today her most eloquent spokesman. United Germany points to her Siegesallee. Scotland found her world-interpreter in the stories and poems of Walter Scott.

America has made a beginning, but only a beginning. No writer has yet realized the possibilities of world-appeal that lie in our Revolutionary War as Shakespeare realized the possibilities in the far less significant Wars of the Roses, or Scott in the border skirmishes between Lowlander and Highlander, or Schiller in the tragedy of the Thirty Years War, or Victor Hugo in the single battle of Waterloo. One great Revolutionary novel or drama in which the contributions of both the South and the North—of South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia as well as Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania—should be portrayed with equal insight and with compelling power, would bind this nation together in the indissoluble bonds of a common sympathy and a common historic pride. Such a work will never be written, nor would it be acclaimed if written, until each State recognizes the value of its own historic material. No writer can be just to a State until that State is just to itself.

National unity and stability must be built upon a foundation of common sympathies, sacrifices, and triumphs. Every battlefield of the Revolution, where American valor was tested and not found wanting, will yet become a link in the golden chain of national brotherhood. The men who fought here and the men who have since wrought here are nation-builders. Slowly but surely the truth of history is widening its domain, and a heroic past is returning to make a

heroic and united present. This Battlefield, already a Mecca of patriotism, will yet become in the expanding life of this commonwealth a stepping-stone to a larger national consciousness and a chapter in the epic of a nation's birth. I dedicate this monument, therefore, to the spirit of a just and impartial history. In gratitude and love I dedicate it to the splendor of the past and to the ever-widening service of the future.

No Man is Fit to Be Entrusted With Control of the Present Who is Ignorant of the Past; and No People Who Are Indifferent to Their Past Need Hope to Make Their Future Great.